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Cord Meyer

Carter Gets Tough With Soviet Spies

WASHINGTON

If conciliation were his chief aim, President Carter would have quietly deported the two Soviet spies. It is significant, therefore, that he decided to indict them after a sharp debate within the administration.

The conciliatory option had strong advocates, including CIA Director Stansfield Turner and representatives of the State Department. The debate that preceeded the FBI's announcement that the Soviets had been arrested marked another move by the President to deal in more steely fashion with the Kremlin.

The facts are not in dispute. As the result of the loyal cooperation of a U.S. naval officer and effective counter-intelligence work by the FBI and naval intelligence, three Soviets were caught in flagrante as they tried to bribe the naval officer into supplying them with secret data on our most advanced anti-submarine warfare technology.

One of the Russians was an attache at the Soviet mission to the United Nations who enjoyed immunity as an accredited diplomat. Having violated his status, he will be declared persona non grata and forced to leave, if the Soviets do not withdraw him.

The other Russians, both U.N. employees, have no diplomatic status. Although they carry Soviet diplomatic passports, the U.S. government has not accepted them as accredited diplomats, so they have under law no immunity. The debate raged over what should be done with them, once they had been caught in the act of spying.

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Surprisingly, Turner took the lead in arguing that these two should not be arrested and brought to trial. He wanted to let them leave the country without punishment because he feared Soviet retaliation against American citizens in Russia. Traditionally anxious to avoid confrontations, the State Department supported Turner.

Turner and the State officials maintained the Soviets might retaliate by arresting American officials in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. They also voiced fears that private U.S. citizens traveling in Russia might be arrested on trumped-up charges and held as hostages against the release of the two Russian U.N. employees.

These arguments were stoutly opposed by Attorney General Griffin Bell, speaking for the Department of Justice and the FBI. He pointed out that hundreds of Soviet citizens are without diplomatic status in this country, either in transit or on permanent assignment, whether they are U.N. employees, members of visiting delegations, exchange students, or sailors on leave from Russian ships in U.S. ports.

Bell contended it would be a mistake to make it easy for these non-diplomats to engage in espionage by letting them leave the country with impunity. Prosecution and punishment under the law, Bell argued, was a far more effective deterrent in helping the FBI to cope with the Soviet espionage operation in this country, which Sen. Daniel Moynihan, D.-N.Y. recently described as "massive."

Bell went on to maintain that as attorney general it was his responsibility to enforce the laws, and that he would have to answer to the American people if his failure to do so led to the loss of vital secrets.

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The President quietly came down on Bell's side. He may have been motivated as much by domestic as by foreign policy concerns. Failures after World War II to move against Soviet espionage opened a Pandora's box of paranoid suspicion. The late Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wis., gained his start as a demagogue from the hesitancy of the Democrats in moving against Soviet spies.

Fear of Soviet retaliation may make discretion the better part of valor for small countries such as Finland in the shadow of Soviet power. But if the U.S. is intimidated in this way, the credibility of the American campaign to persuade the Western allies to act decisively against proven Soviet agents will be destroyed.

By his firm decision, Mr. Carter has taught the Soviets that spying in the U.S. is a dangerous game. This counry cannot let fear of Soviet provocations determine whether or not its laws are to be enforced.

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